



the conversion

of Doc Beade

Hilaire du Berrier

YOU COULD ALWAYS TELL when spring was about to burst upon the ugly wooden town of Flasher, North Dakota, where I was born. A wrinkled old Indian named Albert Wind-Did-Blow would rumble into town in a lumber wagon, sometimes accompanied by one squaw and sometimes by two, and then you knew that spring was there. All Albert had been waiting for was a chance to get off the reservation.

Sometimes in his impatience he jumped the gun a bit and got caught in a blizzard. If the blizzard was too bad he and the current Madame or Mesdames Wind-Did-Blow came to our house and Mother made a bed for them on the floor;

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if the blizzard wasn't too bad, he just suffered through it stoically.

A few weeks later the snow would melt and buffalo grass would be green for a month or so, before turning a burnt brown. Then Louse Creek would thunder like a real river for a spell, before calming down into a few muddy holes filled with baby catfish and small boys. My pal, Ronnie Albrecht, and I would announce our intention of going down to Brown's pasture, between the railroad tracks and the creek, to look for crocuses as soon as the snow had melted.

Ronnie's mother would admonish us not to go in swimming yet. It was too cold. We would promise to stay out of the creek. My mother would tell us to come home early, and off we'd go, always leading a stray dog.

At Albert's tent we would stop for a few minutes, and I would do the talking. Albert and my parents

were friends — in fact, one of Albert's wives had made the pair of moccasins which were the first shoes I ever had, at about the age of one month.

"How," I would say.

Albert would grunt, "How."

I would point to the dog and ask, "How much?"

"*Kosh pappa nopa som-okeca*," Albert would reply.

Kosh pappa nopa som-okeca meant twenty-five cents in Sioux. Regardless of the dog's age, size, or breed, Albert's price never varied.

Between the ages of six and fifteen Ronnie and I led innumerable dogs up to his smoke-filled teepee, with "How," "How much?" "*Kosh pappa nopa som-okeca*," and an answering grunt our entire conversation; the whole scene has the shiny surface of an old lithograph in my memory today. Albert's squaws made soup out of the dogs, and that was how Ronnie and I got our spending money.

Old Albert didn't hang around Flasher from choice. The Indian agent would not let him wander very far off; he could only leave the reservation for so long, every so often, though he loved to travel.

Now this restriction on his freedom may have been irksome, but it had its compensating feature. On the first of the month, regular as clockwork, every Indian collected thirty dollars from the government. And every papoose, full blood or

half-breed, received a quarter section of land at birth. Naturally, no one but a no-good cowhand would want that reservation land. Cowhands were expected to marry squaws and breed children as a means of acquiring grazing ground for cattle, which probably accounted for the low esteem in which half-breeds were held in our country. It was a *mésalliance* on the squaw's part, if anything.

THE CASH PART of the arrangement was another matter. The thirty dollars a month was Albert's pay for closing his ears to the call of hunting grounds and warpath. Just staying there was his work, and he earned every cent of his pay! When you look at it in that light, against a background of rolling prairie and drab little towns where white men lived because they wanted to, the Indians were the only intelligent people in North Dakota.

And since he had to work so hard for his money, you never caught old Albert throwing it around. A pouch of tobacco from time to time, a bottle of patent medicine that tasted like firewater, and a stray mongrel when he pitched his tent in Brown's pasture — these and a new squaw every few years were the only luxuries Albert allowed himself, unless you want to count his one flyer in the publishing business.

The pasture was named after the Eastern promotor who talked my

father into going out there and starting a town; Mr. Brown hoped thereby to give value to the miles of worthless prairie he had quietly bought up from disillusioned homesteaders. Part of the lure Mr. Brown held out to Father, in whose ears lingered the place names of France, was a promise that he could name his town after himself.

THIS DREAM the government nipped, however, because the state already had two towns with similar names. Father, in disgust, put some papers in a hat, closed his eyes, drew out the one with Mr. Brown's secretary's name on it, and his new fief was named after her.

The naming of the creek was another matter. Old man Wade, who drove the stagecoach between Fort Mandan and the Black Hills, swore that for three days after the cowboys took their fall swim, on their way into Mandan with a cattle shipment, you could see lice floating down the stream.

I was the first paleface born in this stragglng wart on the Middle West's worn face, and a veterinary officiated for want of a doctor. Father imported a few gaunt trees and built a wooden sidewalk in front of his own buildings. Hitching posts were set up where it was hoped that in time trees would give shade. When it rained, water settled in the depressions pawed by restless horses. The rest of the street was a swamp,

but each hitching post marked a hard-bottomed puddle where little boys could go wading and sail boats.

In winter you froze. When summer came a hot wind full of dust swept across the plains, driving Russian thistles and sweating males before it, the former to pasture fences or infinity, the latter to the stagnant mudhole south of the tracks known as Louse Creek.

In the house Father entertained the best friends he could find in this spiritual wilderness — Turkey-Track Bill the cowboy, and Albert Wind-Did-Blow the Indian, and Doc Beade the gaunt missionary, who came from the Eastern world on the other side of the Missouri.

Turkey-Track Bill was regarded as a paragon among men — for a cowboy. Otherwise, he was an amusing, lying rogue who could take care of himself and deserved no special consideration. Obviously, there was something wrong with him or he would not be a cowpoke.

Albert Wind-Did-Blow and the handful of older Indians who came to town with him were in a class by themselves. They did not speak English, but they and the white men understood each other perfectly. Everyone liked old Albert.

As for Doctor Beade the missionary, he was a scholar, Episcopalian, High Church, and a man to look up to.

To put it simply, they looked down on Turkey-Track Bill, as much

as they liked him. Albert Wind-Did-Blow they regarded as an equal, for all that he was an Indian. And Doc Beade, with a cultivated mind and a voice such as no man had ever heard in our country before — he was, admittedly and without shame, a superior.

Doc Beade was always trying to convert Albert and make him go to work, scheming to send him up Old-Age River on a third-class ticket, without dog soup and the old dances. And Albert, not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings, agreed, in principle at least, to everything.

Once a man brought a tent show to town; and Rich Spielman the druggist and Al Busch the grain buyer and Bill Shearer the lumberyard man turned out to help put up the tent. When the canvas was hoisted and the first row of plank seats in place, the stranger and his civic-minded helpers sat down to fan themselves, drink a bottle of cherry pop, and admire their work. Suddenly a shadow appeared beneath a drawn-back flap, and old Albert, with his shapeless hat, faded overalls, long hair, and a ring in his ear, walked in.

He looked around the huge tent, and in an awed voice observed, "Big teepee." Then he too sat down on the plank and from time to time mumbled something to himself in Sioux.

Doc Beade found it slow going trying to make the Indians learn to

read and write and accept the established church.

Nevertheless, he kept on hammering at them, urging the young bucks to go to Indian school and the braves to take up farming. He pleaded with them to give up firewater and war-paint and the old dances, and after a while his efforts began to tell.

A FEW of the younger boys entered Indian school, where they learned to sleep indoors and eat like white men, but they never lasted long. A few months, and tuberculosis or smallpox or something else would hit them.

Though epidemics caught the boys in school and their chests caved in and they did not believe what the white men told them anyway, they did go to school; and back on the reservation the fine old man told the braves their race would die out if they did not work.

He talked to them about God and the High Church, and he said they should plow and plant wheat. Then when fall came they would be happier with money they had earned, instead of sitting back and waiting for a monthly check from the government. Waiting for that check from the government would ruin them in time. "Lay it aside," he said, "but don't use it."

They were not enthusiastic, but he was a good man, and they did like his stories. A few of the younger braves, probably drafted by their

elders to keep Doc happy, actually took up farming.

Then something went wrong. Doc began to grow soft and lose his drive. It was said that the grain buyers cheated his protégés on weight and grading. Or it might have been that, being such a broad and intelligent person, Doc had looked at both sides of the question by that time and changed his mind. Anyway, he and the Indians seemed to come to the conclusion simultaneously that it was better to go back to the old ways, waiting for spring to melt the snows from the badlands so they could eat the tongues and hearts of the cattle that had died in the blizzards. The Indians taught Doc their secrets and their legends, and the farming petered out.

SLOWLY the change became greater. The Indians did not work at all any more, and neither did Doc. His teeth decayed and his clothes became ragged. I heard my mother say once that he was drinking like a fish. Instead of trying to stop the powwows, he sat on his haunches with the rest of them and chanted, with a wild gleam in his eyes, to the beat of the drums.

He lived in a teepee next to old Albert's, and one day a rancher brought word that Doc had married a squaw.

Once, Albert came around with a dirty piece of paper which he held out sheepishly to be read. It was

written by Doctor Beade, and, though I have forgotten its exact wording, Al Busch, the grain-elevator man, said it was something about looking at this man well because he was the last of a dying race.

It gave his age and a few details of his life and ended with a plea for any loose change or old clothing one might care to give him. Albert and the ex-missionary were thicker than thieves by then — two time-tried though ill-assorted friends ending their days together — the one with skin like wrinkled leather, the other a face of dry parchment stretched over a skull.

Father, as usual, had a place set at the table for Albert and his squaw, and they sat down with us.

"Try some of this," Father said, handing Albert a dish of freshly ground horse-radish. "*Washtay*," he added. *Washtay* means good.

The Indian took a heaping spoonful, choked, and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"*Wa-nitch*," he counselled his squaw, getting up as he did so and setting the horse-radish in the corner, on the floor, where she could not be stung by it. *Wa-nitch* means no good. He came back to the table shaking his head.

From time to time through the meal Father and Albert chuckled. When it was over, everything on the table was put into a brown paper bag for Mrs. Wind-Did-Blow to take back to the teepee.

Through all the meals Albert ate at our house there was never an indication by word or look that he and I had any business relationship on the side. In the house we barely noticed each other; but when he started back for Brown's pasture, he knew I would be along shortly, somehow, with a dog.

A few weeks later, Doc Beade came around, "riding the grub-line," as we called it. A neighbor recognized the old coat Doc was wearing as one he had given Albert, the Indian Doc had tried to convert, and who had ended by converting Doc.

SINCE IT WAS AGREED that Doc knew everything, his opinions were respectfully sought after. Whether it was farming or history, or the interpretation of a news item about some foreign place in an old newspaper someone back East had mailed to a relative, Doc was the last authority. Poverty had not undermined his dignity, and the glorification of mediocrity had not destroyed men's regard for their betters.

In a sense, he was our "man Flammonde from God knows where," come to guide groping prairie exiles through a maze of half-solved riddles. And, ragged or not, he was looked up to.

Every so often he would appear at our house for a change of cooking and a bath. Father would send out word that he was in town and would

stay over Sunday. But Doc did not preach. Instead, the farmers would come in on Saturday night. Father and Bill Shearer would set up seven or eight rows of folding chairs in the hall above the store, where the Odd Fellows and the Modern Woodmen held their meetings. By eight o'clock the chairs would be filled and the room thick with tobacco smoke, and Doc Beade would give his lecture. He talked about Europe and farming and books and a scientist back East who called himself a rain maker.

I was too young to attend these meetings. All I can remember about them is his voice and our conversation the time he left the bundle of books with me.

By that time, it was evident that he was falling from grace. The men still respected him and hung on what he said; but after he married the squaw, Mother was coolly polite and her lips closed in a thin line when he came to the table.

It wasn't that Mother did not like squaws. It was her unconscious membership in the White Women's Mutual Protection League, I suppose, that made her frown on any such dangerous precedent as Dr. Beade's marrying one of them. She saw nothing wrong with Albert's having two squaws, but Dr. Beade's having one conflicted with her ideas of propriety in some way or other.

The time Dr. Beade brought the books started like all his other visits. He arrived in the afternoon. After

dinner he told stories in the back of the store, surrounded by a group of attentive men. The things he talked about did not interest me, and I am not sure if his grown-up listeners knew why they hung on his words either. I did not appreciate that Doc's conversation was pure poetry until years later. Then I realized that something went with him, lost for want of recording.

No one bothered with the written word out there. Words were hard enough to read, let alone write. So Doc became a sort of prairie Homer, riding the grub-line and trading stories at night for a few days of food and shelter. His voice gripped men and carried them away while he was talking, but what he said was beyond their ability to put on paper.

I FOUND HIM in the parlor, the day after his arrival, reading the names on the boxes of rolls on top of mother's player piano. He asked me to wait a minute while he went upstairs for something.

When he came back he had a small bundle, and in deepest confidence he unfolded a proposition. In the bundle were some booklets printed by a newspaper office in Bismarck, the pages held between a brown paper cover by two wire staples.

"It is an Indian play," he said. "Now you sell these for fifteen cents each, and for every one you sell you can keep five cents for yourself.

"But don't tell anyone," he impressed on me.

From a cursory glance at the number of books on hand, it looked like a good proposition to me. The profits were not as high as selling dogs, but the supply of dogs, in a small town like ours where it was tacitly understood that hunting dogs were exempt from sale, was limited.

I gave it a try, but it was no use. No one wanted any. In fact, no one figured a Sioux had anything to say that was worth translating anyway.

When it came time for Doc to go back to the reservation, we had an accounting. I had not made a sale, but he said, "I'll leave them with you. I know you are honest. Maybe someone will come along and want one. You can hold the money until I come back."

As to who the prospective purchaser might be, he was rather vague; but he was such a poised and kindly old gentleman, while he was talking to you you felt he must be right.

His books gradually spread over the house. In time, Mother went on a house-cleaning rampage and moved them out to the woodshed, where they were stacked in a neat pile. Eventually the pile was knocked over and when a scuttle of coal came in, a few books would be with it.

Huddled in the woodshed, I started reading one one day, while smoking a cigarette made of corn silks and tissue paper. It was so interesting, I finished it. I remember

now, it was sheer beauty. Young as I was, I could not put it down, but for the life of me I cannot recall how it went.

One day the last one was gone, and I have never seen any of them since.

YEARS LATER, I got to talking with Bill Shearer and Rich Spielman about Doc Beade and his book, and they remembered hearing something of that enterprise. "It was a sort of communal project Doc sold the Indians on," Rich explained.

"Naturally, when Doc ceased to be a missionary his money stopped. And on going Indian he did not come in for the thirty dollars a month the rest of the bucks received.

"So Albert Wind-Did-Blow and Spotted-Dog and the rest of his friends got together and decided he was nonetheless a member of the tribe and had a right to a government check on the first of the month with the rest of them.

"Since the Indian Commissioner did not feel that way about it, they agreed to prorate a modest levy among themselves. Then they and Doc would all have the same amount."

It meant only a small amount from each Indian, and they agreed

he was well worth the money. No Sioux, as far as Rich could ascertain, ever begrudged those few coins for their convert. All they knew of the wide world they knew through him, and nightly he came through with new and dazzling visions to make the future bearable.

Albert's flyer in the publishing business was a result of one such evening. Doc, looking around for something to do with his stipend, thought of a corporation, and decided to let his friends in on it. He took what he felt each could spare and allotted stock accordingly.

They talked it over among themselves and settled on something all of them liked for their first book. Doc did the translating, in the conical seclusion of his teepee, and sought out an inexpensive printer.

I feel sad when I picture the suspense of those Indians watching the unfolding of their first and only venture, their Point Four program for backward people, and their disappointment when it did not go over.

It was the only book the Sioux Indian Publishing Company ever put out. Neither they nor their ragged old renegade Episcopalian ever tried to convert white men to poetry again.
